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STAT

Covering the Capital

It Irks Administration, But Washington Post Becomes a Top Paper

Its Influence, Profit Grow Under New Editors; Critics Call Reporters Advocates

A Football in the Newsroom

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WASHINGTON--Early this year the Washington Post gave extensive coverage to the case of a hippie girl charged with murdering her father. Critics said the Post blew the story out of proportion. One critic charged sarcastically that the story was played up in the Post because the girl and her friends "are hippies—and we all know what that means. A hippie is Charlie Manson: So a hippie is a murderer."

Criticism of newspapers is commonplace today, but this particular protest came from an unusual source. The attack on the Washington Post appeared in an editorial--in the Washington Post. "We had deplored this (sensationalism) for other papers, so we really couldn't remain silent about ourselves," explains Philip L. Geyelin, the editor of the Post's editorial pages.

That's what readers have come to expect of the Post in recent years. Nothing is sacred—least of all itself—on the capital's biggest and most influential paper. One columnist denounces another, in print, as an "old screech owl of war." A reporter breaks a story about a dispute between two Post columnists. Nearly everyone takes pot-shots at friends of the owner. And an outsider who denounces the Post as "the most irritating paper in the country" is subsequently hired for a top job on the publication.

The paper doesn't limit its attacks to self-flagellation. Its plain-spoken editorials lash out regularly at friend and foe—especially such foes as Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew—and its news columns routinely uncover local, national and world wrongs. Its political columnists range from one extreme to the other, and its society writers are omnipresent—so none of the mighty or their consorts is immune from attack or ridicule.

Fans and Foes

All this brings the Washington Post fans and foes. The morning paper's circulation, 502,000 daily and 663,000 on Sunday, far surpasses that of the Evening Star, which has 305,000 daily and 358,000 on Sunday. The Post also dominates in both advertising and influence, two areas where the Star formerly was No. 1. Also, the Post, with estimated pretax profit of $10 million in 1969, considerably outearns the Star. A third Washington paper, the Daily News, an evening tabloid owned by the Scripps Howard chain, ranks last in circulation, advertising, earnings and, especially, influence.

One regular Post reader is Vice President Spiro Agnew, and he often doesn't like what he reads. To him, the Post is part of that subversive Eastern liberal establishment that he dislikes so much, and he regularly attacks the paper in public and in private. (The feeling is mutual. The Post supported Mr. Agnew for governor of Maryland, but it compared his nomination for the Vice Presidency with the appointment by the Roman emperor Caligula of his horse as proconsul. An Agnew associate says the comment "was the lowest blow he has ever received in politics.")

Another foe is Sen. Barry Goldwater, who says he reads the Post "because it has a good comic section." (Its 28 strips, close to a record for a U.S. daily, run from Peanuts to Dick Tracy to Mary Worth.) President Eisenhower used to have the sports pages cut out and brought to him so he wouldn't have to read the rest of the paper. (Its sports pages are considered merely adequate and overly fawning by many sports fans.) And Richard Nixon refused to subscribe when he was Vice President because he didn't want his daughters to see the Herblock cartoons of him looking sinister and stubbly faced. (Herblock gave Mr. Nixon a shave when he was elected, but the cartoons are still less than flattering.) Ronald Ziegler, White House press secretary, reflects the Administration's attitude toward the paper by even refusing to acknowledge directly that Mr. Nixon reads the Post now. He will say only that "the President reads those papers that are available in Washington."

One reason Administration officials don't care for the Post is that its persistent attacks on the Haynsworth and Carswell nominations to the Supreme Court are believed to have helped defeat those nominations. At one point, a Herblock cartoon depicted Judge G. Harrold Carswell emerging from a garbage can.

The Post vs. The Times

The Post has other than political critics. Some critics say that Post reporters are permitted to advocate causes in their news stories. Others say the paper's news judgment is sometimes atrocious—on one recent day the news of the settlement of the California grape strike and the British dock strike was on inside pages of the Post, while a piece on computerization of some local traffic lights appeared on page one.

Critics also contend the paper's foreign coverage is spotty—it has no men assigned to Egypt or Israel, for instance—and that too often the Post has to scramble to catch up on a major domestic story where it neglected to assign a reporter. "They're a long way from our class," flatly states A. M. Rosenthal, managing editor of the New York Times.

Perhaps, but if there is a gap the Post is closing it every day. Though they are in different cities, the Washington Post and the New York Times are each other's main competitor, top editors of both papers say. Every night each paper gets a photo transmission of the other's front page and puts its reporters to work on any big story that the competitor has exclusively. (As a result, the Post sometimes keeps exclusives out of its first edition.) The Times' recent decision to add a second page for editorial columns was reportedly inspired by the Post's success with [illegible]

"In the 1950s, the Times had serious journalism in Washington all to itself," claims Max Frankel, the Times bureau chief here. "No we feel their competition very keenly." T Times still sells far more papers in Washingt (23,000 daily and 31,000 Sunday) than the Po sells in New York (1,300 daily and 1,000 Su day)—but until recently virtually nobody New York bothered to read the Post.

"We're never going to be best the way th New York Times is best because we have a di ferent situation here," says Katharine Gr ham, president and majority stockholder of th Washington Post Co. and publisher of th paper. "They can write to a highly educate specialized audience, but we are a mas paper." Indeed, as the only morning paper the capital, the paper must cater to rich an poor, smart and not-so-smart, urbanite an suburbanite. Besides being hometown paper t 535 Congressmen, it also is hometown paper t about 110,000 ghetto dwellers. And it has larger circulation in Virginia than any pape published in that state.

'Are 4 Eggs Too Many?'

In trying to be all things to all men, the Po contains a lot of trivia mixed in with the new It runs two columns on advice to the lovelorn a question-and-answer column on pets an much other material that serious readers co sider drivel. (Example: "Question: My 1 year-old grandson scrambles four large egg three or four times a week for breakfast. this too many eggs for a 14-year-old boy to ca at one time? Answer: Healthy 14-year-old have a lot of sudden growing to do. Four larg eggs for breakfast is a harmless way to sta his busy day.")

Still, some people think Mrs. Graham tend to be too modest. There are some who think th Post is the very best paper in the nation in it editorials and investigative reporting, an overall, second only to the New York Times. that is so, Mrs. Graham deserves most of th credit. The Washington Post was purchased i 1933 by her father, Eugene Meyer, an immi grant's son who had made a fortune in inves ment banking. For 15 years, he ran it as a sec ond-rate, largely red ink operation. In 1948, h turned the Post over to his daughter's husband Philip Graham, who built the Washington Pos Co. into a profitable enterprise by acquirin radio and television stations, Newsweek maga zine and, in 1955, the Post's only remainin morning rival, the Washington Times-Herald.

While the Washington Post Co. was thriving though, the Post itself was just meanderin along, shaking up few people and trying to get by on a shoestring. One reporter remembers being forbidden by a city editor from covering a major story in 1959 because it would have involved a $5 taxi fare. (He finally worked out a compromise—borrowing the city editor's car.)

Katharine Graham

Mr. Graham shot himself to death in 1963, and his widow, then 46 years old, took over the corporation and the paper. She soon set out to hire newspapermen who wou